

Congress expands Vermont wilderness

By Erin Kelly
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WASHINGTON -- Nearly 42,000 acres of wilderness were created in Vermont's Green Mountain National Forest by Congress on Wednesday -- after months of debate and just two days after the plan was nearly derailed.

There were about 59,000 acres of wilderness. The House, in a voice vote, approved the New England Wilderness Act, which expands the amount of forest with wilderness protection to almost 101,000 acres.

Once an area is designated wilderness, there can be no development, logging or road construction. Off-road vehicles and automobiles also are banned.

President Bush is expected to sign the bill, which passed the Senate in late September. It also will create more wilderness in New Hampshire.

"I am very pleased that we have passed a bill that will preserve more acreage in the Green Mountain National Forest for generations to come," said Sen. Jim Jeffords, I-Vt., the ranking member of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee. "This bill is the product of many years of hard work and reflects the true spirit of conservation in Vermont."

The legislation had strong bipartisan support from the Vermont and New Hampshire congressional delegations but almost was derailed Monday by an objection from the Republican chairman of the House Agriculture Committee, who persuaded GOP leaders to pull it from consideration. Chairman Bob Goodlatte, R-Va., lifted his objection after reviewing changes made to the original bill and talking to its sponsors, his spokesman said.

"Vermonters have high expectations about the stewardship of our natural resources, and I am pleased that we were able to pass legislation that recognizes the diverse needs of Vermonters while ensuring that wilderness areas are preserved for future generations," said Rep. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt.

The Vermont delegation changed its original bill after objections by Republican Gov. Jim Douglas. A version of the wilderness act approved by the Senate on Sept. 19 created about 48,000 acres of wilderness. Douglas protested that the legislation would create wilderness near small towns that did not want their use of the land restricted. Douglas asked the GOP-led House to block the bill.

A compromise was reached, and the delegation agreed to remove 6,066 acres of the northern part of the proposed Glastenbury wilderness area in Bennington County.

"This has been a difficult achievement but one that we know has enduring significance and value to the people of our state," said Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt.

"Many Vermonters wanted much more wilderness set aside, and some preferred none at all," Leahy said. "We have worked hard to achieve a balanced plan that reflects the overall interests of

our state, its people and its future."

Rep.-elect Peter Welch, D-Vt., who supported the legislation during his campaign, praised the House vote.

"This proposal is an act of balance, an act of improving access, and an act of critical foresight for future generations," Welch said.

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